

Editorial

Oncology Research and Clinical Decisions Based on Immunohistochemistry: The Importance of the Technical Aspects That Support a Complex Method

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Immunohistochemistry (IHC) is the group of techniques that use antibodies as specific reagents to identify and demonstrate several cell and tissue components that are antigens. This linking allows locating and identifying the in situ presence of various substances by means of color that is associated with the formed antigen-antibody complexes.

The practical value of this biotechnology area, widely used in Pathology and Oncology, in diagnostic, prognostic, theranostic and research context, results from the possibility of combining a colour marker with an antibody without causing any damage to specific binding established between antibody and antigen. This provides the microscopic observation of the target locations where the antibody and hence the antigen are present [1].

IHC is presented as a powerful means for identification of several cellular and tissue structures that can be associated with pathologies, and of the consequences, at functional and morphological level, of these same elements action.

In the last twenty years, there has been a progressive development of IHC, leading to an improvement in these methodologies for antigen demonstration in formaldehyde fixed, paraffin embedded tissues, which has contributed significantly for the diagnosis, prognosis and therapeutic guidance of several pathologies [2,3].

Nevertheless, some difficulties associated with the particularities of certain pathologies and technical limitations remain. Furthermore, the standardization of IHC has been a hard task to complete. The quality of the immunostaining depends on four main technical aspects [4].

- i. Plan the full process in advance;
- ii. Pre-analytical factors (emphasis on tissue fixation and processing);
- iii. Antigen retrieval (AR)
- iv. Sensitivity of the detection system.

Therefore, when using IHC techniques in research or clinical context, these technical aspects must be considered and addressed.

Plan the Full Process in Advance

The planning phase must entail the evaluation of all human, physical and material resources. The right procedures for all test stages, from sample collection to the final report as well as the use of registration, monitoring and traceability methods must be

in place. All associated personnel (e.g. surgeons, nurses, general operations workers, oncologists, pathologists and biomedical scientists/technologists) must be trained and competent [5]. A full validation process must be performed for each test result and quality assurance procedures must be in place throughout all technical aspects e.g. quality control of reagents namely fixative solutions, dehydrating and impregnation agents and IHC reagents. Finally, all procedures must be reviewed and updated regularly in order to keep up with the most recent advances in the field.

Pre-analytical phase

The pre-analytical phase starts with the sample collection from the patient. Date and time of sample collection should be registered (start of cold ischemia time). All tissues must be immersed on an aqueous solution of 4% formaldehyde (10% formalin) phosphate buffered at pH 7.0 with a minimal volume of 4 times the dimensions of the tissue [6–10]. The cold ischemia time should be minimized and may extend to a maximum of 60 minutes [10–14]. Larger surgical specimens should be readily sliced and then immersed in fixative solution, for at least 24 hours with a temperature of 22 °C - 26 °C and should not exceed 96 hour of fixation time [6,7,10,12,15–17]. When grossing the specimens is not immediately possible, samples should be chilled to 4 °C, for no longer than 4 hours [10,12,15]. Samples transportation to the pathology laboratory must be done as soon as possible, under controlled conditions, respecting all safety standards for biological samples [6–10]. The surgical specimens that arrive at the laboratory not sliced and fixed, should be properly and immediately sliced and emerged in fixative solution according to the conditions set out above. The tissue processing should be automated and the reagents quality must be monitored taking into

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consideration the amount and type of samples that go through them [10,17]. When biological tissues must remain in the tissue processor for more than 24 hours (public holidays or weekends) a delayed start with samples in fixative (first processing station) should be performed [10,17.] The embedding of samples must be done swiftly and the paraffin blocks must be stored at 20 °C - 25 °C [7,10]. The microtomy conditions should always be kept similar for all samples. Section thickness should be 2-4µm and extension must be performed in water with controlled conductivity (e.g. distilled water). The water bath temperature must be constantly monitored at 50 °C maximum. Adhesion time and temperature must be constant, being advisable a temperature not exceeding 65 °C [10,18]. Sections for IHC, ideally, should be cut and stained as soon as possible – it is known that histological sections with more than 6 weeks can lead to antigenicity change[6,7,9,10,18–21].

Antigen Retrieval

For the vast majority of antigens, formalin fixation will lead to a reduction of their functional affinity for the antibody (avidity) or even completely obliterate this affinity. A measurable effect that formalin fixation has on most tissue antigens is either reduced or absent immunostaining. AR, is the term used to describe the restoration of the antigen's optimal immune reactivity after formalin fixation and, frequently, consists in high temperature heating of histological sections [22,23]. In 1945, Fraenkel-Conrat and colleagues [24] conducted several biochemical studies on the interactions between formaldehyde and proteins, demonstrating that the established cross links could be destroyed by heating to high temperatures or using strong alkaline solutions. Much later, in 1991, Shi and colleagues discovered that submitting IHC slides to high temperature when immersed in specific solutions was a very important and effective step. These researchers demonstrated the great benefits of this treatment on many antigens immunostaining, which was particularly intriguing taking into account the presumed deleterious effects of high temperatures on protein antigens [25].

Although it is known that proteins denature between 70 °C and 90 °C, it appears that fixed tissues resist denaturing at these temperatures [26]. Many other researchers were able to demonstrate this phenomenon, in particular Kawai et al. They concluded that 90 °C for 10 minutes AR is more effective than 60 °C for 120 minutes [27]. In 1993, Cattoretti and collaborators, confirmed the effectiveness of this procedure and suggested alternatives to the heavy metals AR solution used previously [28]. Since then, the pH 6.0 0.01M citrate buffer became one of the most widely used AR solutions. However, later it was found there is not one AR solution that fits universally all types of antigen. Thus, several antibodies should be tested until the AR optimal conditions are found. Other very important factor is the solutions pH [29]. Some researchers have even found the pH value of an AR solution is more important than their chemical composition, particularly for nuclear and cell membrane antigens [29]. The presence of chelating agents, that promote the extraction of calcium ions affect AR and some antigens are more prone to react with certain chelating agents, usually ethylenediamine tetraacetic acid (EDTA), amongst others [30,31].

Several high temperature methods were tested such as microwave oven [25], autoclave [32–35], pressure cooker [36,37], water bath [27] and hot steam [38,39].

The AR success demonstrated that the modified protein structure induced by formaldehyde is a reversible process and that the proteins retain their primary structure.

The introduction of AR methods was undoubtedly one of the major advances in IHC – before its implementation only a small percentage of antigens could effectively be detected.

Sensitivity of the detection system

Antibodies are proteins and, therefore, they are not naturally stained. So, it is necessary to make them microscopically visible when they are linked to the antigen. In 1941, Albert Coons and his collaborators conjugated a fluorescent marker to the antibody and this allowed the identification of the antigen [40]. However, at the time, the ratio of marker per tissue antigen was very low, and amplification was poor in most cases. The false negative rate was, then, high, and this narrowed the viability of IHC to exceptional and sporadic situations.

The ultimate goal has been, ever since, to create a stable staining method with enough intensity to eliminate doubt about the presence or absence of the antigen in the tissue [1]. Over the years abundant ways to increase the signal that is associated with tissue antigen have been developed–e.g. Simple indirect method, PAP method, avidin-biotin methods [41–46]. Some of these methods were never widely used, some others were often used back then and barely used currently [47].

Today there is a simple method that offers a higher amplification: the indirect polymer method [48,49]. The use of polymers in IHC brought 4 major advantages: higher amplification rate, lower error rate, faster turnaround time and simplicity of the method [50,51]. These systems do not have (strept)avidin or biotin and therefore the use of blocking reagents is unnecessary. The major disadvantage is its higher cost which, can be seen as a "minor" factor given its benefits [52].

Currently, there are several IHC methods that use polymers with a high signal amplification, namely the internal skeleton polymer and the enzymes micropolymer.

The internal skeleton polymer relies on a macromolecule consisting of a large central skeleton to which are attached large amounts of antibody molecules and enzymes, like horseradish peroxidase (HRP) [49]. The central skeleton molecule is dextran, a high molecular weight polysaccharide that can reach 500 kDa. Dextrans consist of a sequences of α-D-glucose units predominately linked by α-1,6 glycosidic bonds. They are manufactured from sucrose during growth of bacteria belonging to the *Leuconostoc*, *Streptococcus* and *Lactobacillus* genera, all belonging to the *Lactobacillaceae* family. However, most of the dextrans are synthesized by the bacterium *Leuconostoc mesenteroides* species. The dextran has a neutral pH, it is soluble in water and it is highly stable.

The enzymes micropolymers methods are based on the enzyme

polymerization and its association to antibodies, forming enzyme micropolymers. According to its manufacturers this approach avoids the problems arising from the use of an internal skeleton. The micropolymer, with a high density of very active enzyme, coupled to a secondary antibody generates a reagent which overcomes the steric interference that emerge from the huge dimensions occupied by the internal skeleton polymer. This method provides greater accessibility to the antigen and, due to the micropolymer's small size, it increases reagents-diffusion to the target and reduces non-specific binding.

Conclusion

Oncology research and clinical decisions are largely based on IHC results. Considering all the multifactorial aspects that can bring bias to these results, it is essential that the IHC Laboratory procedural proficiency is established. Basic standardization and reproducibility of all methodologies, including internal and external quality control measures must be regularly applied to provide slides of diagnostic quality. The participation in IHC external quality assessments using consensual schemes such as UKNEQAS (<http://www.ukneqasiccish.org/>) and others, is of utter importance to measure effectiveness.

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